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ABSTRACT

Interview practices of Physicians Assistant (PA) educational programs were compared in a national study of 43 such programs, using a four-page, 16-item mailed survey. Of these, 41 conducted interviews, but the number of interviews required and the interview formats used varied greatly. Thirty-seven programs who interviewed met with candidates one at a time. A slight majority (58%) of the programs interviewed applicants only once or twice. A surprisingly large number (41.5%) of the PA programs require three or more interviews. Some programs had highly structured interviews; other were much more loosely structured. Many preferred a somewhat structured interview with allowance made for spontaneous questions. Interviewers typically are PA program faculty members. No conclusions about the efficiency of admissions interviewing can be drawn without more information. (SLD)

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A Survey of Physician Assistant Admissions Interview Practices: Establishing Key Evaluation Variables

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ABSTRACT

A national survey of Physician Assistant educational programs identified a wide variability in program practices for conducting and evaluating admissions interviews. The authors sought to identify ways in which programs might be compared according to interview practices as a necesary first step in evaluating the efficacy of admissions interviews. Results showed that nearly all programs conducted interviews, but that the number of interviews required and interviewers used differed greatly. A slight majority of programs (58%) interviewed applicants once or twice only, while others interviewed as often as six times. Within the group of programs interviewing once or twice there was a subset of programs who preferred highly structured interviews. Within the group of programs who interviewed three or more times there was no preference between highly versus loosely structured formats. In general, programs preferred somehwat structured interviews with great allowance made for spontaneous questions. The authors felt that, given the wide variation in interview structure, the practices being employed must be described better before any conclusions are drawn about the efficacy of admissions interviewing in general.

A Survey of Admissions Interview Practices Used by Physician Assistant Educational Programs

Despite widespread use, opinions vary as to the efficacy of the admissions interview as an evaluation tool. There is little to be found in the medical education literature in which specific program practices are actually compared. Nevertheless, statements are routinely made about the efficacy of the admissions interview without adequately describing the variability in practices.

It is this paper's goal to describe the variation in admissions interview practices within an allied health profession, the national community of physician assistant (PA) educational programs, in order to demonstrate how greatly interview practices differ from program to program, and thereby to support the contention that conclusions about the efficacy of interviewing are specious when unsupported by data which compare and analyse the effects of various interview practices. This is seen as a necessary first step in understanding how different practices may influence effectiveness.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The admissions interview has often been characterized as an effective means of examining non-academic qualities, e.g., qualities not reflected by grade point average (GPA), or standardized achievement tests. One study has found that the admissions interview ranks second in importance to GPA in admissions decision-making (3). Programs differ in their preferences for structured or unstructured interviews. Most studies have reported that a structured or semi-structured format

focusing on an applicant's background, skills, and motivation (3,4,7,9,10,11) is favored. Feedback to interviewers is rarely provided (10). Evaluation of the interviewing process, in general, is underutilized.

One frequently cited strength is that the interview serves as an effective non-academic assessment measure. Qualities believed to be measured by the interview include maturity (1), motivation (1,2,4,6,7), communication skills (1,2,4,8), creativity (4,8), and problem-solving abilities (4,8); all identified as desirable attributes in a clinician (2,5).

Prominent among cited weaknesses of the interview is that it is seldom a reliable and valid tool in admissions selection. A study by Graham and Boyd, and a survey by Willer, Keill, and Isada, identified low reliability and validity as a significant concern (6,7).

METHOD

A four page survey was mailed to administrators at 49 PA educational programs in the United States. The survey contained 16 items addressing several categories of information regarding admissions interview practices. The investigators divided the items into six subsets, five of which are reported (1-4, and 6).

The first subset dealt with the logistics of the interview, the second subset focused on interviewers, the third subset addressed interview content and procedures, the fourth subset identified practices regarding the evaluation and reporting of data collected, and the fifth subset asked what other sources of information are collected by the program outside the interview. A sixth subset solicited

opinions on eight statements about the value of interviewing as part of the admissions process.

RESULTS

Forty-three (87.8%) of the 49 programs returned completed survey instruments. Virtually all of the responding programs (n=41, 95.3%) interviewed candidates as part of their admissions selection process.

Subset #1: Logistics of the Interview

Thirty-seven of the 41 programs who interviewed (90.2%) met with candidates one at a time. However, the number of times a candidate may be interviewed, and the number of interviewers in the room with the candidate at one time, varied widely across the 41 programs. Thirteen programs (31.7%) conducted one interview with selected candidates while 11 programs (26.8%) had two interviews. The other 17 programs conducted three (n=6), four (n=6), five (n=3), and six or more (n=2) interviews per candidate. One program required six separate interviews with selected candidates.

Sixteen of the 41 programs (39%) utilized only one interviewer. Ten (24.4%) used no more than two interviewers at a time, while 15 programs (36.6%) used three or more interviewers. Cross tabulations showed that 12 programs (29.3%) required no more than two interviews and used no more than two interviewers per meeting. Table 1 presents the data for number of interviews and number of interviewers.

Subset #2: Interviewers and their Preparation

Program faculty were voting members of nearly every interview team (n=38, 92.7%). Fourteen programs (34.1%) included program alumni as voting interviewers, and 17 programs (41.5%) included other PA's

working in the community as voting interviewers. Students participated as voting interviewers for 12 programs (29.2%). Thirty-one programs (75.6%) which interview reported that interviewers were trained, although only six identified the training as formal.

Subset #3: Interview Content and Procedures

Responses to the five statements on the use of spontaneous versus predetermined questions were collapsed for clarity. Comparison of responses, therefore, reflect overlapping in several categories. Results showed that programs could be compared on these items in terms of how many times they interview candidates; those that interview no more than twice versus those that interview three or more times. Twenty-one programs from the first comparison group (those interviewing no more than twice) indicated they almost never or, at least, usually do not use an interview format wherein questions are all or mostly predetermined. There was little difference between the comparison groups on this issue as 24 programs from the second comparison group (three or more interviews) agreed. Conversely, 25 programs indicated that they almost always or, at least, usually follow an all or mostly predetermined format. A large difference between the comparison groups was observed as 22 of the 25 programs interview no more than twice.

There was no pattern of preference between comparison groups for the 25 programs preferring the spontaneous approach (14 versus 11) as was true for opposition to the use of all or mostly predetermined questions. However, there was a large difference between comparison groups regarding opposition to the use of all or mostly spontaneous questions in the interview; almost twice as many programs interviewing

once or twice opposed this format (30 versus 16). Table 2 presents a visual representation of the results on interview format preference.

Subset #4: Evaluation of Applicant Responses and Reporting of Data

Critical differences were found to exist among programs regarding methods of quantification and standardization for evaluating responses. Responses showed about one-fourth (n=11, 26.8%) used highly structured systems, i.e., points assigned to each response. The majority (approximately 55%) indicated modified scoring systems were used, responses not scored but, instead, a score or a set of subscores would be assigned to the interview. The balance of programs (n=8, 19.5%) did not formally score the interview at all.

No program reported using a formal method for assessing ratings reliability, however several indicated that an informal assessment of agreement among interviewers' was practiced.

Twenty-seven programs (65.8%) prepared a written summary on each candidate interviewed; 22 programs (53.7%) presented verbal summaries; and 18 programs (43.9%) constructed a rank-ordered list. Programs generally used more than one reporting format.

Subset #5: Opinions about the Value of the Interview

The last set of items on the survey asked programs to indicate their agreement with eight global statements concerning the interview and admissions procedures. The statements addressed the following broad concerns: general satisfaction with the interview and admissions procedures; preference for design or format of the interview and admissions procedures; and purpose of the interview. A five-point scale from strongly disagree (value of one) to strongly agree (value of

five) was provided. Respondents expressed strong satisfaction with the efficacy of their interview and selection admissions procedures, even though the same group felt neutral about the interview as a predictor of student success in their program. As a group, respondents did not support more quantification in their procedures, and mildly supported informal, one-to-one interviews. The distribution of responses was bimodal regarding the formality/informality with which the interview is conducted.

DISCUSSION

Findings from this survey supported the contention that interview practices differ too widely between PA programs to draw conclusions about the efficacy of admissions interview practices without limiting those conclusions to those practices. The practices described here offer a richness of detail on the conduct and format of the admissions interview which begins to identify both the fine points and gross differences by which the efficacy of admissions interview practices might legitimately be evaluated.

Among findings in the literature confirmed by this study was that most PA programs (63.4%) conduct one or two interviews per candidate which supported other research. However, a surprisingly large number (41.5%) of PA programs require three or more interviews. Five programs (12.2%) require five or more interviews. The allocation of so many person hours (i.e., more than three interviews and three interviewers) might be justifiably questioned, but only if more were known about the length of interviews at each site.

Interviewers are typically program faculty (92.7% of PA programs),

however, survey findings revealed that among PA programs there is a broad use of non-program faculty (46.3%), practicing non-faculty PA's (41.5%), and current program students (29.2%), as voting interviewers.

Survey findings also supported the literature which shows that most allied health programs favor a semi-structured interview style. Most PA programs favor a semi-structured style in which some basic questions guide the procedure, with ample allowance for spontaneously generated questions. A distinct subgroup of programs, however, favored a tighter format in which predetermined questions dominate, although spontaneous questions are not prohibited. These programs tended to interview their applicants no more than twice. The number of interviews which a program requires of its applicants was determined to be an important criterion for making comparisons between programs and their interview practices. It appears that the number of interviewers used may be related to the number of times a program interviews applicants, and therefore, both variables merit consideration as criteria which distinguish programs.

Sixteen programs (39.1%) did assign scores by categories of questions which indicated that quite a few programs have developed fairly detailed interview scoring systems. Seven programs (17.1%) reported they scored each individual response.

Responses to the statements on the value of interviewing clearly confirmed other findings within this survey, suggesting an internal consistency to the responses. Quantification schemes, which are associated with tightly structured formats, were generally opposed by the respondents. Likewise, a plurality of programs (46.3%) agreed that

informal interviews work best, although a notable number of programs disagreed (26.8%), or were neutral on this point (29.3%). Of the 11 programs who generally disagreed that informal interviews work best, seven interview candidates no more than twice. On the other hand, of the 19 programs who generally agreed that informal interviews work best, there was no clear pattern of preference between comparison groups. These results seem to suggest that the division of opinions is sharpest on the issue of formality of interview structure.

PA programs believed their selection and admissions procedures, especially the interview, were satisfactory in terms of general effectiveness. At the same time, this was somewhat confounded by responses that the interview is not the best predictor of success in one's program; a broadly held sentiment. If the interview is used as a screening tool for evaluating candidates on non-academic criteria in order to identify the best qualified students, and if it works well in that capacity, then one would expect stronger support for the efficacy of the interview as a predictor of success.

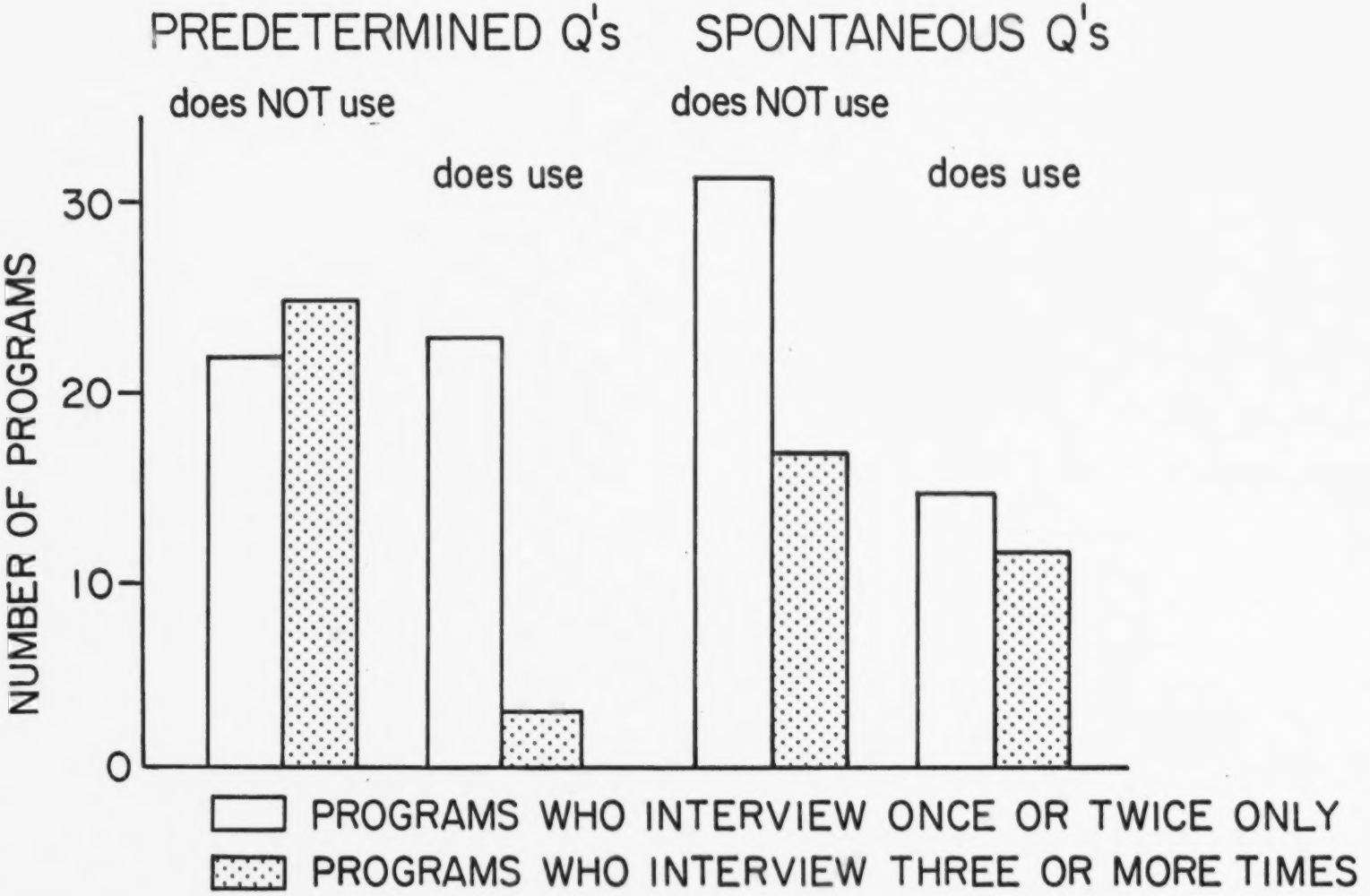
Further research on the admissions interview should explore the efficacy of various interview formats, carefully identifying what factors define formal versus informal interviews, the nature and use of predetermined versus spontaneous questions, the length of the interview, and the goal of the interview. Research on interview evaluation should include an assessment of interview procedures and practices as well as their effects on the quality of data collected and the selection decisions which result. Comparison groups should be identified at least according to number of interviews and, perhaps, by

number of interviewers. There is still much to be understood about how the admissions interview can best be employed.

Table 1:
Comparison of Physician Assistants Educational Programs by Number of Interviews Required and Number of Interviewers per Session

INTERVIEWS REQUIRED	INTERVIEWERS PER SESSION						
	1	2	3	4	5	6+	
1	3	3	2	2	2	1	13
2	4	2	1	3	1		11
3	3	2	1				6
4	3	2	1				6
5	1	1	1				3
6+	2						2
	16	10	6	5	3	1	41

Table 2:
Use of Spontaneous versus Predetermined Questions by Comparison Groups



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